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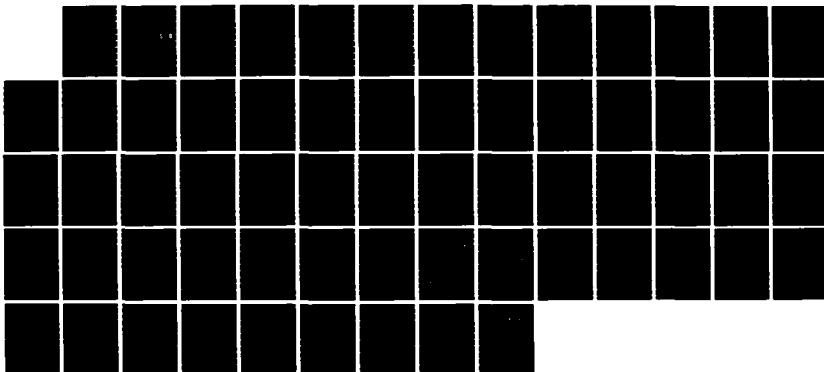
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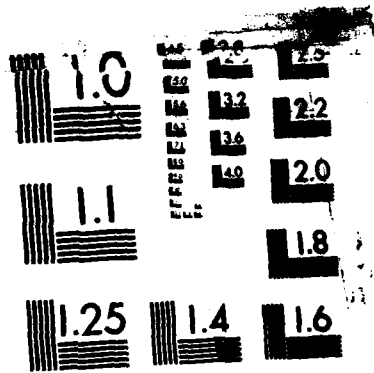
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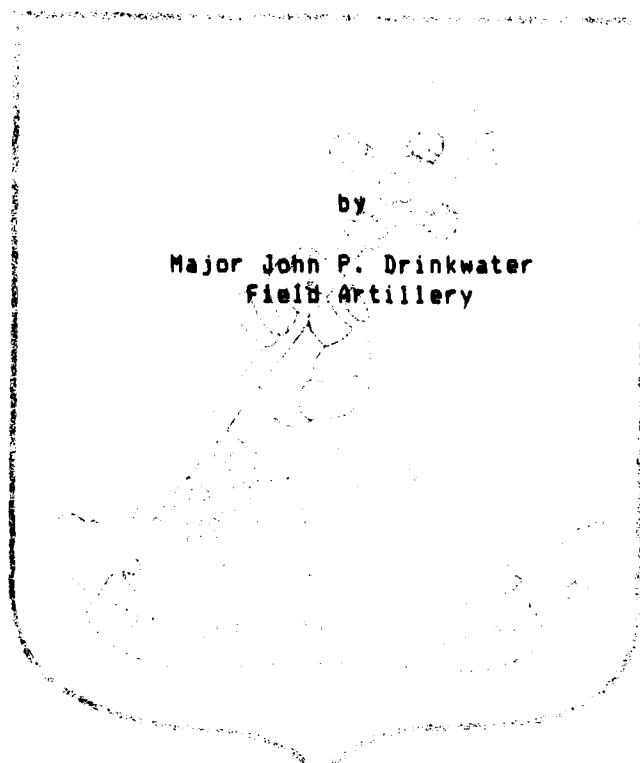


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When to Pull the Trigger for the Counterattack  
Simplicity vs. Sophistication



by  
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Field Artillery

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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# ABSTRACT

WHEN TO PULL THE TRIGGER FOR THE COUNTERATTACK - SIMPLICITY vs.  
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This study is a comparative analysis of current U.S. Army doctrine at division-level with the historical experience of the German Army in World War II, on the Eastern Front, specifically that of the 48th Panzer Corps in battles along the Chir River during the period 6 - 22 December 1942, to determine key considerations in assessing the right time to execute tactical-level counterattacks against Soviet-style offensive operations. It identifies the specific factors that the 48th Panzer Corps considered, assesses how they affected the outcome of the battles, describes current doctrine, and examines the adequacy and implications of current doctrine in light of the German experience. The study suggests that counterattacks can be on time or late, but rarely will they be early.

The conclusion of the study is that timing tactical-level counterattacks depends not on some mythical or sophisticated determination of the "right" time, but rather on more fundamental precepts embodied in the principles of war. Deciding when to counterattack is a problem of making the decision within the context of the battle itself, consistent with the generally accepted principles of surprise and mass.

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## "The Flashing Sword of Vengeance"

### Introduction

AirLand Battle has brought about a resurgence of belief in and attention to Clausewitz's notion that although the defense is the inherently stronger form of waging war, it clearly includes the fundamental requirement for offensive action in order to be victorious -- victory from an absolutely passive defense being an absurdity in his view. Victory in the defense comes from counterattacks executed when waiting no longer gives any advantage to the defender. For Clausewitz, this "sudden powerful transition to the offensive -- the flashing sword of vengeance -- is the greatest moment for the defensive."<sup>1</sup>

The need to attack in order to destroy the enemy is no longer questioned by today's practitioners of the art of war; however, a question which remains inadequately answered in the doctrinal literature is just how does one assess the right time to strike with the "sword of vengeance." According to Clausewitz:

In the final third of the battle, when the enemy has revealed his whole plan and spent the major part of his forces, the defender intends to fling this body against a part of the enemy forces...while the outcome still hangs in the balance....

Judging the decisive moment in the battle -- knowing when the outcome still hangs in the balance -- might be obvious to the Clausewitzian genius and thus, theory suffices. But most of us need something more specific.

As the bridge between theory and practice, FM 100-5 provides the principal doctrinal connections between Clausewitz's theoretical construct of the superiority of the defense and the practitioner who seeks to hone his skills by applying the AirLand Battle doctrine. According to FM 100-5, "timing is critical to counterattacks" (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> We all seem to accept this commonly held belief, but the "how" of it continues to puzzle tacticians. If we assume that timing is, in fact, critical, then the question we must ask is, "How do we assess the right time to execute one?" Although AirLand Battle doctrine reflects the integral role that offensive tactics play in a successful defense, it does not adequately address what factors the commander should consider in deciding when to "pull the trigger." The implication of this doctrinal void is that one plans and executes it like any other offensive action. The problem is particularly relevant as AirLand Battle doctrine grows in popularity throughout the Army, especially in Europe where the threat of a conventional war with the Warsaw Pact still poses the greatest risk.

Thus far, no one seems to have subjected this timing problem

to critical analysis. In trying to come to grips with it, especially as it relates to our potential adversaries -- either Soviets or Soviet surrogates, many of whom employ Soviet-style tactics, a comparative analysis of a relevant historical experience with current doctrine could be particularly instructive. My contention is that assessing the right time to execute division and corps level counterattacks against Soviet-style offensive operations depends on factors which have historical precedents in the German experience against the Soviets on the Eastern front during World War II, particularly that of the 48th Panzer Corps in battles along the Chir River near Stalingrad during the period 6 - 22 December 1942.

The 48th Panzer Corps provides us an example of a past adversary of the Soviets who achieved tactical success under extremely adverse conditions similar to those facing the U.S. Army in Europe today. First, according to Earl F. Ziemke, the war on the Eastern Front was:

...at a stage in which the Russians demonstrated a command of offensive tactics equal to that of the Germans in conception and sufficiently effective in execution to prevail against an opponent who had passed the peak of his strength.<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not the Germans had passed their offensive culminating point can be debated; however, they still represented a tactically and operationally potent adversary who would not reach the decisive point in the war on the Eastern Front until Kursk in July, 1943. Likewise, the Soviets had developed considerable

sophistication in operational art and tactics. Their Stalingrad offensive in November, 1942 represented the breakpoint between Phase I and Phase II of the Great Patriotic War. They were beginning to apply effectively the lessons they had learned during the disastrous first year. The relative sophistication between the Germans and the Russians is analogous to that currently existing between the U.S. Army and the Warsaw Pact. Secondly, the 48th Panzer Corps was greatly outnumbered by the overwhelming strength of the Soviet's Fifth Tank Army. Most of today's scenarios for Central Europe assume a similar numerical imbalance in favor of the Warsaw Pact. Finally, the requirement for the 48th Panzer Corps to hold terrain that had operational significance, coupled with the lack of depth for its defense, is analogous to our defensive posture in Central Europe wherein the political realities of Western Europe dictate a defense well-forward along the Inner-German and Czechoslovakian-German borders, but disallows great operational depth.

## Operational Background

As we will discover later, the timing of counterattacks by the 48th Panzer Corps was influenced by concepts, such as higher commander's intent, more so than by a clear, sophisticated intelligence picture of the battlefield as is suggested in our current doctrine. Consequently, an understanding of the operational context in which the battles took place is essential.

The problems that faced the Germans in Southern Russia in early December 1942 were the result of Hitler's push to seize the oilfields in the Caucasus to support the German war effort, and his fanatical insistence on capturing Stalingrad primarily for its political and emotional appeal. In reality, however, the two objectives were far too difficult to accomplish simultaneously; they were 350 miles apart and, therefore, caused such a dissipation of combat power that the security of the Germans' left flank in Southern Russia became tenuous. Thus, Army Group B had as its principal mission the protection of Army Group A's left flank as the latter drove toward the Caucasus (See Map 1, The Advance to Stalingrad). The bulk of this mission, however, fell to Germany's unreliable allied armies from Hungary, Romania, and Italy, while the German Sixth Army was given the mission to seize Stalingrad. Sixth Army's subsequent failure to secure Stalingrad set up inviting conditions for a Soviet

counteroffensive. The Soviets had correctly assessed the German's operational weakness:

The most vulnerable place in the operational disposition of the Stalingrad group of the enemy were the flanks, protected by the less stable Rumanian units which created favorable conditions for carrying out the encirclement of the main German Group.<sup>5</sup>

Despite warnings by the Chief of the General Staff on the perilous nature of the extended left flank (400 km long) being held by the allies and on the intelligence indicators of an impending Soviet counteroffensive, Hitler remained intransigent. He refused to allow the Sixth Army to divert its attention from Stalingrad. Consequently, the Roumanian Third Army became the target for the northern pincer of the Soviet counteroffensive in late November designed to encircle the German Sixth Army in Stalingrad and, hopefully, to cut off the German army in the Caucasus.<sup>6</sup>

The attack, which began at midnight on 19 November with a massive artillery barrage of 3,500 guns on both flanks of Stalingrad,<sup>7</sup> was overwhelmingly successful. The Stalingrad Counteroffensive was on. The Roumanian Third Army could not hold against the onslaught of the Soviet's Sixty-Third Army, Fifth Tank Army, and Twenty-First Army. They pushed the Roumanians off the great bend in the Don River and back across the Chir River. By 22 November, General Paulus reported that the Sixth Army in Stalingrad was surrounded (See Map 2, Stalingrad).<sup>8</sup>

On 24 November, General von Manstein assumed command of the newly formed Army Group Don which consisted of the Fourth Panzer Army south of Stalingrad, the Sixth Army which was caught in the pocket, and the Roumanian Third Army in disarray on the west side of the Chir River. He immediately began efforts in accordance with orders from The German Army High Command "...to bring the enemy attacks to a standstill and recapture the positions previously occupied...."<sup>9</sup>

Shortly before the Soviet counteroffensive, the 48th Panzer Corps Headquarters had been transferred from Fourth Panzer Army operating south of Stalingrad and the Don River to a position behind the Roumanian Third Army in order to bolster the latter's defensive sector by assuming control of a German panzer division and a Roumanian panzer division.<sup>10</sup> Both were short equipment and soldiers. When the Soviet counteroffensive was launched, the Corps lost control and had to fight its way out of a pocket situated to the northwest of Kalatsch in which it was encircled on 27 November. The Corps then occupied positions along the Chir River west of Petrovka.<sup>11</sup> The Commander of the 48th Panzer Corps, Generalleutnant Heim, was made the scapegoat by Hitler for the disastrous defense of the Don River which resulted in the encirclement of the Sixth Army. He was dismissed for allegedly "inexcusable" actions by the two divisions under his command; for their failure to stop the rout of the Roumanian Third Army -- an impossible task for anyone under the circumstances.<sup>12</sup> As a



result, Oberstleutnant von Mellenthin and General von Knobelsdorff took over as Chief of Staff and Commanding General respectively of the 48th Panzer Corps. By 4 December they would take charge of the 11th Panzer Division commanded by General Balck, the 336th Infantry Division, and a marginally effective Luftwaffe Field Division.<sup>13</sup> Prior to the arrival of the 11th Panzer Division and the 336th Infantry Division, the area on the Chir River was weakly defended by an assortment of anti-aircraft groups, and "alarm" units made-up of B-echelon elements and Sixth Army soldiers who were returning from leave when their army was cutoff and encircled in Stalingrad. According to von Manstein, two Luftwaffe Field Divisions reinforced the area later but were only marginally employable due to their lack of training, battle experience, and competent officers and NCOs.<sup>14</sup>

Von Manstein's primary concern was the relief of the encircled Sixth Army approximately 25 miles to their east. He, therefore, put into motion "Operation Wintergewitter," a relief attempt of Sixth Army scheduled for 8 December. The Fourth Panzer Army under General Hoth was to attack north from Kotelnikov on the east side of the Don toward Stalingrad, cut through the Soviet covering forces on the southwest side of the encirclement, and link-up with the Sixth Army. Meanwhile, the 48th Panzer Corps was to attack to the east out of the narrow German bridgehead at the confluence of the Don and the Chir in

the vicinity of Nizhne-Chirskaya into the rear of the Soviet covering forces and link-up with the Fourth Panzer Army attacking from the south. The purpose was to reestablish a corridor to the Sixth Army and to seize bridgeheads across the Don with the ultimate goal being the breakout by the Sixth Army. Fourth Panzer Army was to be the main effort and the 48th Panzer Corps the supporting attack.<sup>15</sup>

### Situation on the Chir River

By 6 December the situation facing the 48th Panzer Corps on the Chir River had deteriorated further. Signs of an impending continuation of the Soviet offensive in the area of the 48th Panzer Corps had been building since 1 December. In Manstein's view:

It was absolutely vital that we should continue to hold this stretch of river, as our bridgehead in the angle between the Chir and Don, including the Don bridge at Nizhne Chirskaya, was of fundamental importance for the relief of Sixth Army.

Furthermore, a breakthrough in this area would open a clear path to the major supply and communications hubs at the Morosovsky and Tatsinskaya airfields, 25 and 30 miles away respectively, as well as paths to Rostov and crossings on the Donetz.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the tactical defense on the Chir served a number of purposes at the operational level which would be consistent with today's AirLand Battle doctrine. First, it allowed von Manstein to "concentrate forces elsewhere." He needed the freedom to concentrate forces in the vicinity of Kotelnikov for the main effort by the Fourth Panzer Army. Second, it controlled "key terrain." The small bridgehead across the Don was critical for reestablishing a corridor to the Sixth Army, especially if Hoth's army was unable to push through over the longer route from the south. Von Manstein would then have the Fourth Panzer Army push

up the east bank of the Don, link-up with the 48th Panzer Corps at the bridgehead, and together, they would push east the 25 miles to the western edge of the Sixth Army pocket. Operationally, holding the area in the confluence of the Don and Chir would protect critical lines of communication being used to maintain Sixth Army in the pocket. It also provided a pivot around which Army Group Don could keep open the land bridge out of the Caucasus for the ultimate withdrawal from that area of operations. If the Soviets were able to push to Rostov, more than the Sixth Army would be cut off, with even greater strategic and operational implications. Third, holding the Chir River "gained time," both at the operational and strategic levels. Although Hitler's unwillingness to yield ground sealed the fate of Sixth Army, the tenacious defense of both the 48th Panzer Corps and the Sixth Army did cause the Soviets to modify their plans for continuing the offensive. Consequently, the time which was bought enabled the Germans to move replacements and reinforcements into southern Russia for future battles.<sup>17</sup>

As for the Soviets, the situation in early December along the Chir was the result of their first major counteroffensive of the war. After their initial success of encircling the Sixth Army between 17 and 23 November, STAVKA enumerated three priorities: reduction of the Stalingrad pocket, prevention of German attempts to relieve forces in the pocket, and expansion of the offensive westward.<sup>18</sup> The Germans, however, began to

concentrate stronger forces in early December in the Tormosin and Kotelnikov areas for what the Soviets perceived would be a breakthrough attempt to the Sixth Army. Additionally, they realized that the Stalingrad pocket had considerably more forces than their original estimate of 90,000 men. The Soviets had correctly assessed von Manstein's intent to use the Chir bridgehead as a jumping off point to relieve Sixth Army, as evidenced by a cable sent by Zhukov to Stalin on 29 November in which he discussed the possibility of the Germans using a "shock force" to penetrate from Nizhne-Chirskaya and Kotelnikov to establish a corridor for supplying the trapped Sixth Army and, subsequently, affecting its breakout. He recommended attacking the German "groupings" at Nizhne-Chirskaya and Kotelnikov to prevent the link-up of relieving forces with Sixth Army.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, they planned "Operation Saturn" to strengthen and expand the outer ring of the encirclement by destroying the Italian Eighth Army and Army Detachment Hollidt on the Don and Chir between Novaya Kalitva and Nizhne-Chirskaya.

"Operation Saturn" was scheduled to commence on 10 December; however, failure of continued Soviet attacks against the pocket to make appreciable gains, as well as delays in moving men and materiel to the SouthWestern Front, forced a postponement of "Operation Saturn" to 16 December. Meanwhile, Lt.Gen. Romanenko's Fifth Tank Army was to continue its attacks along the

lower Chir in the Tormosin area to destroy German forces in the area and to advance to Morozovsk and Chernishkovskii to eliminate the threat posed by German forces along the lower reaches of the Chir.<sup>20</sup> STAVKA wanted to improve the operational security of the inner encirclement ring by pushing out to increase the distance between the embattled Sixth Army and the rest of Army Group Don.<sup>21</sup> By 6 December, however, the condition of 48th Panzer Corps had changed with the addition of Balck's 11th Panzer Division and the 336th Infantry Division which were to prove themselves formidable opponents to the Fifth Tank Army which was still exhilarated after its tremendous success in encircling the Sixth Army.

Thus, the situation on 6 December had the optimistic Soviet Fifth Tank Army facing the revived 48th Panzer Corps across the Chir River between Surovokino in the north and Nizhne-Chirskaya in the south. The Fifth Tank Army's mission was to seize the Tormosin area to prevent a breakthrough attempt to relieve Sixth Army, whereas, the 48th Panzer Corps' mission was to hold the bridgehead and, on order, to attack to the east to link-up with the Fourth Panzer Army in order to open a corridor to the embattled Sixth Army.

### Terrain and Weather

The terrain over which the battles of the 48th Panzer Corps would be fought in December 1942 against the Fifth Tank Army was a hilly, treeless plateau in a largely agricultural region of southern Russia. It was bordered on the north by the Chir River and in the east by the Don River. Numerous gullies, called balkas, cut the area, their steep banks and depth being well-suited as natural anti-tank obstacles or as cover for manned, anti-tank defenses. Although the area would appear at first glance to be ideally suited for mechanized and armored operations, the severe compartmentalization made much of it inaccessible to vehicles of any type. The road network was entirely unpaved which meant that trafficability was dependent on weather conditions. Although some of the roads traversed the ridgelines, most followed the valleys and gorges. The area included a number of collective state farms as well as several towns and villages along the banks of the two major rivers. The principal ones around which the engagements would flow were: Surovikino in the north on the Chir; Nizhne-Chirskaya in the southeast at the confluence of the Chir and Don Rivers; Lissinski and Ostrovskii, villages on the Chir between Surovikino and Nizhne-Chirskaya; Verchne-Solonowski, fourteen kilometers due south of Surovikino and nine kilometers due west of

Nizhne-Chirskaya; Sowchos (State Farm) 79, five kilometers north of Verchne-Solonowski toward Surovikino; and Tormosin in the southwest. The value of the Chir River as a defensive obstacle in December was negligible. At best it served as "...an obstruction of the crudest, simplest type."<sup>22</sup>

The weather in December 1942 was generally favorable to operations although hard on the individual soldier. The temperature ranged between zero and minus-ten degrees centigrade. A light snow cover ten to fifteen centimeters thick blanketed the area although some drifts had formed in the balkas. The ground was sufficiently frozen to support tanks and to a limited extent wheeled vehicles in cross-country movement. Therefore, mobility as a function of weather was not a significant problem.<sup>23</sup>



### Opposing Forces

It would be appropriate, given my previous contention that conditions on the Chir are analogous to our current perception of a war in Central Europe, that we examine the opposing forces that fought the battles on the Chir. The Fifth Tank Army, commanded by Lt.Gen. P.L. Romanenko, had just completed its exhilarating encirclement of Paulus's Sixth Army as the main effort of the northern pincer movement. In early December, its subordinate units included six rifle divisions, a tank corps, a cavalry corps, and supporting regiments of artillery and tank destroyers. Its strength consisted of approximately 90,000 men, 182 tanks, and 1213 guns and mortars.<sup>24</sup> With the addition of the 5th Mechanized Corps which occurred on 6 December, the tank strength increased by another 183 tanks<sup>25</sup> although they were English Mathildas and Valentine tanks supplied under the Lend-Lease Program<sup>26</sup> as opposed to Russian T-34s or KVs as in the Army's 1st Tank Corps.

By contrast, the 48th Panzer Corps, now commanded by General von Knobelsdorff, consisted of only two combat effective German divisions, the 11th Panzer Division under General Balck and the 336th Infantry Division under General Lucht. The latter included elements of the 9th Luftwaffe Field Division. Other German units attached to the Corps included elements of the 7th

Luftwaffe Field Division, headquarters elements of the 384th Panzer Division, and several improvised units, sometimes called "alarm" or "emergency" units, comprised of assorted unit remnants, supply units, and Sixth Army soldiers who had been cut-off from their assigned organizations when the Army was surrounded. Additionally, remnants of the Roumanian Third Army collected into Group von Stumpfeld, including the 403d Security Division(-) and the Army headquarters were in the Corps' sector.<sup>27</sup> The total strength in soldiers is not clear; however, the tank strength of the Corps was solely in the 15th Panzer Regiment of the 11th Panzer Division and numbered only 25 - 30 tanks. The size of the 11th Panzer Division was approximately that of today's brigade and its regiments the size of battalions. This meant that some tank companies had only two or three tanks.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the corps had almost no artillery on the entire Chir Front and the infantry units in many cases were actually bakers and storekeepers.<sup>29</sup>

Generals Balck and von Mellenthin, however, made few decisions based on force ratios. They considered leadership to be much more important.<sup>30</sup> In fact, they were reluctant to consolidate forces, preferring instead to maintain unit integrity despite how small a unit might become because the value of esprit and cohesion that was sustained counted more than numbers.

### The Battles<sup>31</sup>

General von Knobelsdorff chose to conduct a mobile defense by placing a thin line of infantry along the riverline and retaining a mobile reserve as a "fire brigade" to counterattack any penetration of the weaker stationary force. The principal engagements during the two week period which followed primarily involved the 336th Infantry Division and the 11th Panzer Division.

According to von Mellenthin's account of the battles on the Chir River, the 1st Tank Corps of the Soviet Fifth Tank Army attacked on 7 December across the Chir River on the east flank of the 336th Infantry Division just as it was taking up positions along the Chir between Surovikino and Nizhne-Chirskaya. The attack came on a four-kilometer wide front between Surovikino, defended by Task Force Schmidt, and Ostrovskii. The left flank of the 336th Infantry Division sector was defended by a Luftwaffe Field Regiment. Whether intentional or not, therefore, the Soviet attack hit the principal weakness in the line of defense of the 336th -- Luftwaffe Field units were only marginally effective as front-line ground troops. The initial assault easily penetrated the German defensive line and, by mid-morning, had seized Sowchos 79. The Soviet tank corps continued to attack to the south in the direction of Verkhne Solonovskii, the village

in which the 336th had put its division headquarters.

Meanwhile, the 11th Panzer Division which had been moving up from the Fourth Panzer Army area near Rostov had reached assembly areas in the southern portion of the 48th Panzer Corps sector. Although it could not respond immediately with the entire assets of the Division (it was spread over an area of 180 square kilometers), 15th Panzer Regiment was within five kilometers of Verchne-Solonowski so Balck ordered it north to stop the further southward advance of the 1st Tank Corps. It stopped the Soviet tanks three kilometers north of Verchne-Solonowski. The integrity of the 48th Panzer Corps' ultimate mission to assist in opening the corridor to Sixth Army, however, was now in jeopardy. The 11th Panzer Division had to eject the 1st Tank Corps from the sector.

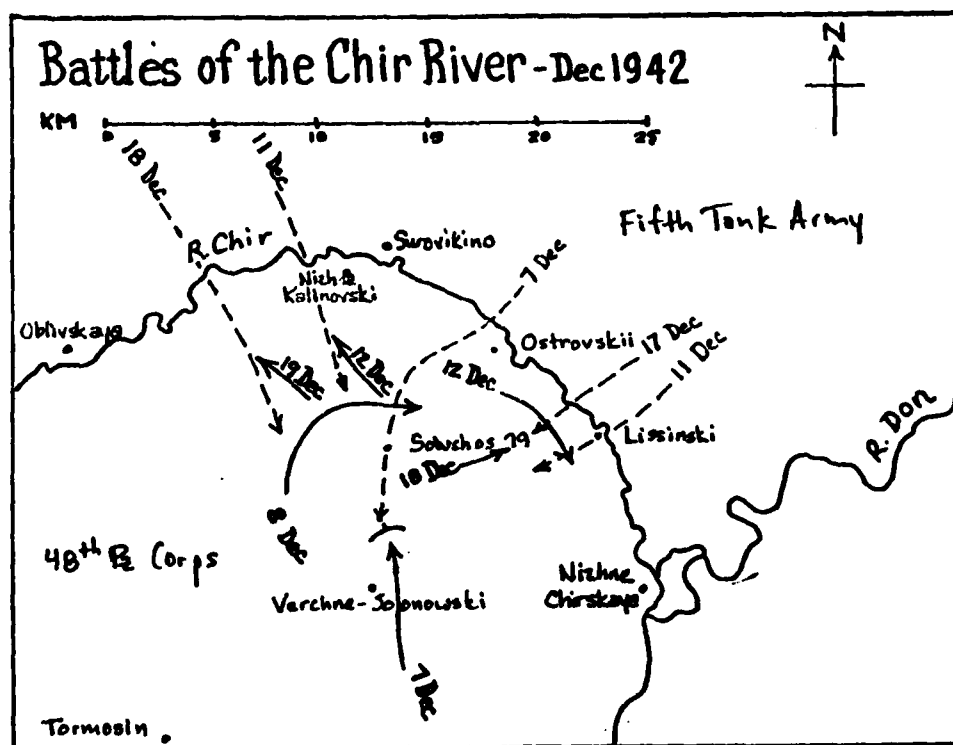
The 336th Infantry Division wanted Balck to do a frontal counterattack against the penetration through the valley of the Sowchos but Balck had other ideas. He decided to blunt the nose of the penetration with the 110th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, anti-aircraft artillery, and engineers, while the 15th Panzer Regiment and 111th Panzer Grenadier Regiment made their way north along the high ground to the west of Sowchos 79 to get into attack positions on the flank of the 1st Tank Corps. He wanted to hit the flank and rear of the Soviet tank strength in order to destroy it since he considered the flank and rear to be the

critical weakness of the Soviet formation. Additional support would come from 336th's artillery. Balck relieved the 15th in place with the 110th and repositioned the 15th and 111th during the night of 7/8 December.

11th Panzer Division counterattacked at dawn on 8 December with complete surprise. 15th Panzer Regiment caught elements of the 333d Soviet Infantry Division moving south and destroyed a long column of trucks. Then it turned south to attack the Soviet armor at Sowchos 79 from the rear. By the close of the day, the Division had destroyed 53 Soviet tanks and, together with the converging attack of Panzer Grenadier Regiment 110 from the south, retook Sowchos 79. During the following two days of battle, the two German divisions eliminated the Soviet bridgehead except for a slender foothold that the Soviets managed to retain on the south bank of the Chir in the vicinity of Ostrovskii. The success of the 11th Panzer Division was the result of surprise by attacking at dawn and of mass by Balck concentrating all his tanks in the main effort.

By 10 December, the 11th Panzer Division and the 336th Infantry Division had repulsed several more attempts of the Russian 1st Tank Corps to breakthrough near Ostrovskii to Tormosin. On the evening of 11 December, the 48th Panzer Corps alerted Balck to two more serious penetrations, one at Lissinski and another at Nizhne-Kalinovskii, southwest of Surovikino.

The first was on the east flank of the 336th; tanks of the Russian 1st Tank Corps, supported with at least one infantry division, had broken through the line between the 685th Infantry Regiment and Group Erdmann on its right during the afternoon to a depth of three kilometers. At the same time, elements of the Russian 5th Mechanized Corps had charged across the Chir near Nizhne-Kalinovskii to a depth of four kilometers in the area defended by the 7th Luftwaffe Field Division. This penetration seriously threatened the rear of Group Schmidt which was holding Surovikino on the north side of the Chir and Group Selle which still was holding the left shoulder of the previous penetration by the 1st Tank Corps on 7 December.



When Balck received the order on 11 December to destroy both penetrations, the 110th Panzer Grenadier Regiment and the 61st Motorcycle Battalion of the 11th Panzer Division were holding the gap between the 336th and Group Selle. Balck appears to have chosen to leave them in place while he took the 15th Panzer Regiment and the 111th Panzer Grenadier Regiment to counterattack. Instead of splitting his force to engage both penetrations simultaneously, he decided to concentrate against the one at Lissinski first. That night he repositioned the 15th Panzer regiment near the headquarters of the 686th Infantry Regiment of the 336th so that it could hit the flank of the Russians at dawn the following morning. Again, Balck wanted to counterattack with surprise as quickly as he could. It is important to remember that neither the Russians or the Germans did any major night fighting with tanks. At 0445 on 12 December, with support from the 111th Panzer Grenadier Regiment to the southwest, Balck launched his counterattack. The speed, surprise, and concentration of tank strength enabled him to quickly destroy the Russians near Lissinski.

After closing the gap at Lissinski, Balck turned his attention next toward Nizhne-Kalinovskii. This would prove to be more difficult. He immediately marched the 15th Panzer Regiment and the 111th Panzer Grenadier Regiment to the northwest and attacked the 5th Mechanized Corps the same afternoon. He apparently considered speed and concentration to be more

important than surprise. Furthermore, he hit the Russians head-on instead of positioning himself on a flank. Counterattacking immediately before the Russians had a chance to reinforce seemed to be the critical issue. The 11th Panzer Division was able to push the Russians back almost to the river before night fell.

Throughout the day, the 1st Tank Corps had continued to apply pressure against Group Selle and the 110th Panzer Grenadier Regiment. Early on 13 December, just as the 11th Panzer Division was about to renew its attack against the 5th Mechanized Corps' bridgehead, the 1st Tank Corps crashed into its right flank west of Ostrovskii. Balck had to break off his counterattack and turn towards this new threat in order to avert disaster. As a result, the 48th Panzer Corps never completely eliminated the bridgehead near Nizhne-Kalinovskii.

Meanwhile, the Russian 5th Shock Army, which had been formed from units of the 10th Reserve Army and others, had occupied positions near the railroad bridge across the Don between the Fifth Tank Army and the Fifty-First Army. On 13 December while the 11th Panzer Division was fighting to stay alive, elements of the Fifth Shock Army attacked the emergency units that were holding the 48th Panzer Corps' bridgehead on the Don north of Nizhne-Chirskaya. By early afternoon, the Russian's 258th Rifle Division, 4th Guards Division, and 7th Tank Corps had forced



Groups Mikosch and Dobiatt off the small foothold on the north side of the Don. The remaining defenders, Group Sauerbruch, fell back to the west side of the Don on 14 December. As they withdrew, they destroyed the bridge. The loss of the German's bridgehead potentially meant that the 48th Panzer Corps would have to reestablish a crossing site on the Don if it was to participate in opening a corridor to the beleaguered Sixth Army in Stalingrad. The 48th Panzer Corps never got the chance.

Romanenko's Fifth Tank Army hit the 48th Panzer Corps hard on 17 December just as the Corps was getting ready to force a crossing of the Don. The 336th Infantry Division faced another crisis at Lissinski and, once again, the 11th Panzer Division came to the rescue. This time, however, it could not complete the job. On 18 December, the 48th Panzer Corps ordered Balck to disengage from his counterattack near Lissinski and proceed immediately to the 7th Luftwaffe Field Division's sector where a far more serious threat had developed with the Russian 5th Mechanized Corps. The 11th Panzer Division marched through the night again to be in position to counterattack at dawn. Balck's panzers struck violently on 19 December in the rear of Russian units and destroyed many of their tanks; however, on 20 December, a determined Russian counterattack threatened the right flank of the Division. Shortly thereafter, the Division was ordered to go on the defensive. By 22 December, the front had quieted down.

but the 48th Panzer Corps' battles were over. Von Manstein ordered the Corps headquarters and the 11th Panzer Division to leave the Chir and proceed at once to Tatsinskaya in order to bolster the defenses in the sector of the Italian Eighth Army, which had caved-in under a massive Russian assault. "Operation Little Saturn" had begun.

Historically, the battles of the 48th Panzer Corps on the Chir were brilliant examples of methods, techniques, and agility. Generals von Knobelsdorff, Balck, and Lucht cooperated during a tense two week period in actions that potentially had significant operational impact on the relief of the Sixth Army. The result was brilliant tactical success; however, for Army Group Don, it was operationally wasted. The primary purpose of the Chir defense was to help reestablish a corridor to the beleaguered Sixth Army, isolated around Stalingrad. Manstein had assessed the immediate military objective of the Fifth Tank Army as the bridgehead that the Germans had held in the angle of the Don and Chir rivers.<sup>32</sup> The 48th Panzer Corps, however, was forced off the bridgehead on 14 December, and in the process of withdrawing destroyed the bridge itself. The Corps still held the Chir front on 19 December but the simultaneous attack of the Fourth Panzer Army could not get beyond the Mishkova River. By then Manstein considered the period 19 to 25 December as the last possibility for the breakout of Sixth Army as long as the 48th Panzer Corps and Detachment Hollidt could protect the western flank while

Sixth Army drove southwest toward the Fourth Panzer Army.<sup>33</sup>  
Unfortunately, Hitler, the Supreme Command, and General Paulus  
himself forfeited the opportunity by rationalizing prestige and  
logistics shortages to keep the Sixth Army in the pocket.<sup>34</sup>  
Consequently, 300,000 soldiers were lost and the efforts of the  
48th Panzer Corps were in vain.

### Key Considerations on the Chir

The purpose of reconstructing the battles of the 48th Panzer Corps along the Chir is to try to see inside the minds of the commanders of the 48th Panzer Corps and the 11th Panzer Division in order to isolate the critical factors that they considered in deciding when to "pull the trigger" on counterattacks against penetrations by the Soviet Fifth Tank Army. Did they attempt to be as sophisticated in their timing as our current doctrine would have us believe is important for success or, were they simpler in their approach? And, depending on their considerations, what are the implications of their experience to AirLand Battle?

Several issues seem to have influenced Generals Knobelsdorff and Balck. The first, and perhaps most significant, factor was a clear understanding of General von Manstein's intent as Commander, Army Group Don, to relieve and evacuate Sixth Army. At the corps-level, it dictated the concept of defense. The 48th Panzer Corps could not afford to allow significant breakthroughs of the defensive line if they were to hold the bridgehead and Chir salient in support of "Operation Wintergewitter." Consequently, General von Knobelsdorff established a mobile defense with a thin line of infantry along the river and a strong, mobile reserve of the Corps' entire tank strength poised to counterattack against major breakthroughs of the line before

the Soviets could exploit their success. For General Balck, von Manstein's intent meant that "the Chir line was to be held."<sup>35</sup> During an interview in 1979, General Balck said that he would wait until the Soviet 1st Tank Corps had achieved its breakthrough, which it could do with relative ease through the thin forward line, then he would counterattack immediately when it finally ground to a halt for lack of additional direction.<sup>36</sup> Despite the inherent appeal of such sophistication -- as a technique it has support in our current doctrinal literature -- von Mellenthin's accounts of the counterattacks do not substantiate any waiting for that reason. Quite the contrary, he seems to have issued orders to counterattack as soon as possible, regardless of whether or not the Soviets' attack had lost momentum. Hitting the Soviets when their attack had ground to a halt might have occurred, but only fortuitously.

The second principal factor was General Balck's perception of the point of main effort, or *Schwerpunkt*, for his counterattacks. It was always the destruction of the enemy force that had broken through the line. In all cases, therefore, Balck directed the 15th Panzer Regiment and 111th Panzer Grenadier Regiment against the enemy force instead of on terrain objectives. He did so despite the fact that the objective of the battles was to restore the German front lines. According to von Mellenthin, "...on the Chir River we definitely had the mission

to keep our line, and if part of the line was lost, we had to regain it -- not to give up, to regain."<sup>37</sup> According to General Guderke, however, the idea of focusing on the destruction of the enemy was most appropriate. In fact that idea had been "bludgeoned" into older general staff officers. "Possessing the terrain doesn't matter; what matters is to shatter the enemy and then the terrain will fall into your hands by itself."<sup>38</sup>

Balck's ability to rapidly focus his combat power on destruction was further supported by the intangible factor of Auftragstatik. This theory and practice of command seems to have been a key to the 48th Panzer Corps' successful mobile defense. It enabled General Balck to issue only verbal orders which facilitated immediate counterattacks. He did not have to go into elaborate detail or the time consuming process of written orders, rather he could articulate intent and concept to subordinate commanders either face-to-face or over the radio. The degree of detailed explanation that Balck used with his subordinates on the Chir depended only on the latter's abilities. Some needed more than others. In Balck's own somewhat acerbic style, "It depended entirely on the subordinate. If he was a stupid fellow, you had to go into much detail explaining the situation to him; if he was an intelligent officer, a word was sufficient for him."<sup>39</sup>

The third factor, which is closely related to the second,

was the long standing principle of war, surprise. Attacking the enemy when he least expected it from a direction for which he was least prepared could confuse and disrupt the Soviet formations. Twice, Balck counterattacked at dawn. Von Mellenthin was emphatic during an interview in 1979 that destroying the enemy was done best by surprise because the Russian character did not respond well to unexpected events; the Russians would frequently panic. The aim, therefore, of the 48th Panzer Corps "...was to attack the enemy by surprise and destroy him." During that same interview, one of the questioners was trying to get Von Mellenthin to distinguish the decisive point in the counterattack; i.e., was it destruction of the enemy by firepower, or "...disorganization and disruption of cohesion..." caused by surprise of a sudden attack from an unexpected direction? Von Mellenthin would not rise to the bait. He would not separate surprise and destruction as the defeat mechanism.<sup>40</sup>

The fourth factor that affected when Balck "pulled the trigger" acted more as an inhibitor than as a catalyst; specifically, when Balck received orders from the Corps to counterattack. The first counterattack order on 7 December, for example, was received while the Division was still making its approach march to the 48th Panzer Corps' sector. Consequently, Balck had to wait until 8 December to strike back. If Balck received a counterattack order in the evening, the earliest he could counterattack was the following morning since tanks were

not equipped to fight at night. He did, however, reposition at night so that he could achieve surprise at dawn the following day. I suspect that had his tanks been fitted with night vision devices or thermal imaging devices that he would not have been at all reluctant to have made night counterattacks.

Thus, the principal factors that affected the timing of counterattacks by the 11th Panzer Division were primarily intent of higher commanders, destruction of the enemy, surprise, and, to a lesser extent, when Balck received his orders. Connecting all of these considerations, however, was the drive for speed -- hitting the enemy as quickly and violently as possible.



## Doctrinal Implications

The question to be answered at this point is "how do the historical experiences of the 48th Panzer Corps on the Chir in December 42 compare to the issues that can be inferred from current doctrinal literature as those which a commander ought to consider in deciding when to execute a tactical-level counter attack?" As pointed out in the introduction to this paper, our doctrine clearly states that timing is critical to counterattacks. If so, it should have been critical in past battles as well. Ostensibly, we should be able to establish a historical connection, or demonstrate the difference, between previous success against our likely enemies and current tactical doctrine with the intention of determining the adequacy of current doctrine. On the surface our doctrine would appear to reflect the experience of the 48th Panzer Corps; however, where explicit was the rule on the Chir, our current doctrine implies a degree of sophistication that *would not* be possible or desirable.

As a point of departure, we should establish basic connections between inland battle doctrine and German war experience. First, within the framework of our current defensive doctrine, the 48th Panzer Corps had the mission to defend the Air Line and the Corps, in turn, gave its subordinate units

missions of defend, screen, and attack as part of the overall plan. The form of the defense was a mobile defense. The 336th Infantry Division was the static element which had the mission to defend along the river; the assorted emergency and alarm units along with the Luftwaffe Field Division performed a screen mission; and, the 11th Panzer Division was the dynamic element which, through firepower and maneuver, would destroy the attacker. Like the conditions which prevailed in '42, our doctrine envisions a mobile defense fought on a fluid, non-linear battlefield. It endorses counterattacks on the flanks or rear of the enemy's main effort to seal off, isolate, and destroy him.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps not as clear, however, is the German's firmly held belief that a mobile defense should automatically focus on the destruction of the enemy in order to achieve a higher aim of retention of terrain. Our doctrine implies that retention of terrain is a mission better suited to an area defense. Nevertheless, both Balck and von Mellenthin would agree with the statement in FM 100-5 that "each defensive plan is matched to the circumstances of the situation at hand."<sup>42</sup>

Current doctrine, although it clearly states that "timing is critical to counterattacks," does not explicitly identify what a commander should consider in making that critical decision. Instead, most of it must be inferred. An examination of those implications and how they relate to the Chir is important to evaluating the adequacy of doctrine.

Our doctrine has several statements about timing. First,

A defender can hold forces in reserve until the attack has developed and can then strike the extended enemy over carefully selected and prepared terrain within the defensive area.<sup>43</sup>

Although the 48th Panzer Corps clearly waited until the Soviet attacks developed, it did so because it was defending from a position of relative weakness in men and materiel. However, the corps did not deliberately wait until the enemy extended himself. Likewise, if Balck's 11th Panzer Division caught the enemy when his attack had ground to a halt as a function of extension, it was purely chance. The principal issue in timing was to counterattack immediately when the Soviets had broken through the thin line of infantry. Furthermore, carefully selected and prepared terrain would have been a luxury. True, in the first counterattack on 8 December Balck chose his route from the assembly areas for the 11th Panzer Grenadier Regiment and the 15th Panzer Regiment to the attack positions so that he gained some cover and concealment, however, it was not terrain with which the division was intimately familiar or which the division had had time to prepare. In order to catch the Soviet's 1st Tank Corps by surprise before it had a chance to reorganize to continue its attack into the depth of the 48th Panzer Corps area or to threaten the rear of the bridgehead that the Germans still held, Balck was more than willing to counterattack over unfamiliar ground. Speed, not elaborate preparation, was the

principal consideration.

A second doctrinal statement that carries implications on timing is, "Once the attacker has been controlled, the defender can operate against his exposed flanks and rear."<sup>44</sup> Control of an attacking enemy is an elusive notion at best and, under most circumstances, probably will not exist at all. Counterattacking presupposes that initiative has been with the attacker; he chose the time and place of the engagement. In the process he can throw the defender off-balance by his choice of ground, direction of approach, or timing of his attack. Romanenko's Fifth Tank Army, despite its lack of coordinated effort and seemingly piecemeal approach, retained the initiative. He attacked at different locations along the weakly held line of the 336th Infantry and 7th Luftwaffe Field Divisions and compelled the 11th Panzer Division to a series of counterattacks to restore the line. Timing of the counterattacks was driven in part then, by the precarious conditions existing within the defensive sector and less on the deliberate choice of the 48th Panzer Corps -- nothing quite like the textbook "shaping" of the penetration or waiting until just the right moment presents itself. Yet, these counterattacks are considered brilliantly executed and have been emulated by the Israelis as the ideal in defensive combat.

Thirdly, the implication of current doctrine that ties decisions to techniques, such as named areas of interests (NAI),

decision points, and target areas of interest (IAI), injects a level of sophistication into the tactical execution of the counterattack and the defense that does not appear to have been present in the staffs or commanders on the Chir River. Although General Balck must have thought about how long repositioning would take, based on the fact that he frequently moved the division at night to be in attack positions at first light the following morning, he did not link the order to counterattack to closure rates of follow-on Soviet formations, the strength of Soviet forces in the penetrations, condition of the routes to attack positions, or location of Soviet rear services. Rather, he counterattacked as quickly as he could once he knew where the penetration was. Time and space became limiting factors on how quickly he could begin. His actions on 12 December when he faced two penetrations at opposite sides of the sector is evidence of his willingness to attack just as soon as he could instead of waiting for some mythical "right time." Balck fought whoever was there when he arrived, regardless of the size. In fact, the whole notion of acceptable force ratios, or correlation of forces from the Soviet perspective, as currently discussed in the U.S. Army was not an issue. According to von Mellenthin, the Germans considered the force ratio to be balanced if it was nine-to-one in favor of the Soviets. He considered twenty-to-one possibly unbalanced and not feasible. What counted more for a successful counterattack was the quality of the leadership and

Fingerspitzengefühl. "[The leader] must have a feeling now I can do it, or I must wait for my regiment to make contact."<sup>47</sup>

When comparing the events of December 1942 to current doctrine as it pertains to Central Europe, however, we must be cognizant of the differences in geography, force structures, and opposing tactics. Otherwise, we run the risk of applying blindly the empirical evidence of the 48th Panzer Corps without considering conditions which tend to qualify the historical analogy.

First, the geography of Central Europe is very different than that on the Chir. Whereas the area of the Chir was relatively flat, open terrain with little vegetation and sparsely populated, Central Europe is hilly, heavily forested, and densely populated. On the other hand, mobility in Central Europe is often easier due to its modern road network, in contrast to the rugged, frequently impassable, dirt tracks that served as roads in southern Russia.

Second, force structures have changed. In 1942, the 48th Panzer Corps had few tanks and most of the infantry was not motorized or mechanized, but foot-mobile. Consequently, all forces available to the 48th Panzer Corps were used in a static role except for the 11th Panzer Division. The infantry was the arm which held the line and prepared it for the concentrated counterattacks of the armor. In contrast, mechanized infantry in

today's divisions in Europe, on both sides, provides for mobility in the entire force that was not available in 1942. Whereas cross-attachment of infantry and armor now is accepted as routine because of the comparable mobility in both arms, the 11th Panzer Division maintained all of its tanks in the 15th Panzer Regiment. Likewise, today's mechanized and armored divisions have 290 - 350 main battle tanks compared to the meager 25 - 30 tanks in the 11th Panzer Division. Despite the apparent lack of mobility, however, von Mellenthin still referred to it as "ein Bewegungskrieg...a war of movement."<sup>45</sup>

Finally, the likelihood is remote of the Soviets attacking in fixed formations and bogging down after reaching their initial objectives as they did in 1942. Although General Balck indicated that both rigidity and flexibility at the tactical-level can be expected, it probably depends on the commander and unit -- some commanders having more initiative than others. He did acknowledge, however, their propensity towards reliance on speed instead of adaptation to terrain. He said that speed is the most difficult to defend against,<sup>46</sup> which might partially explain why the 11th Panzer Division reacted quickly to Soviet penetrations without a clear picture of the exact situation. Notwithstanding the differences, however, we can still draw valuable lessons on the issue of timing, specifically, the degree of sophistication in tactics that we ought to seek.

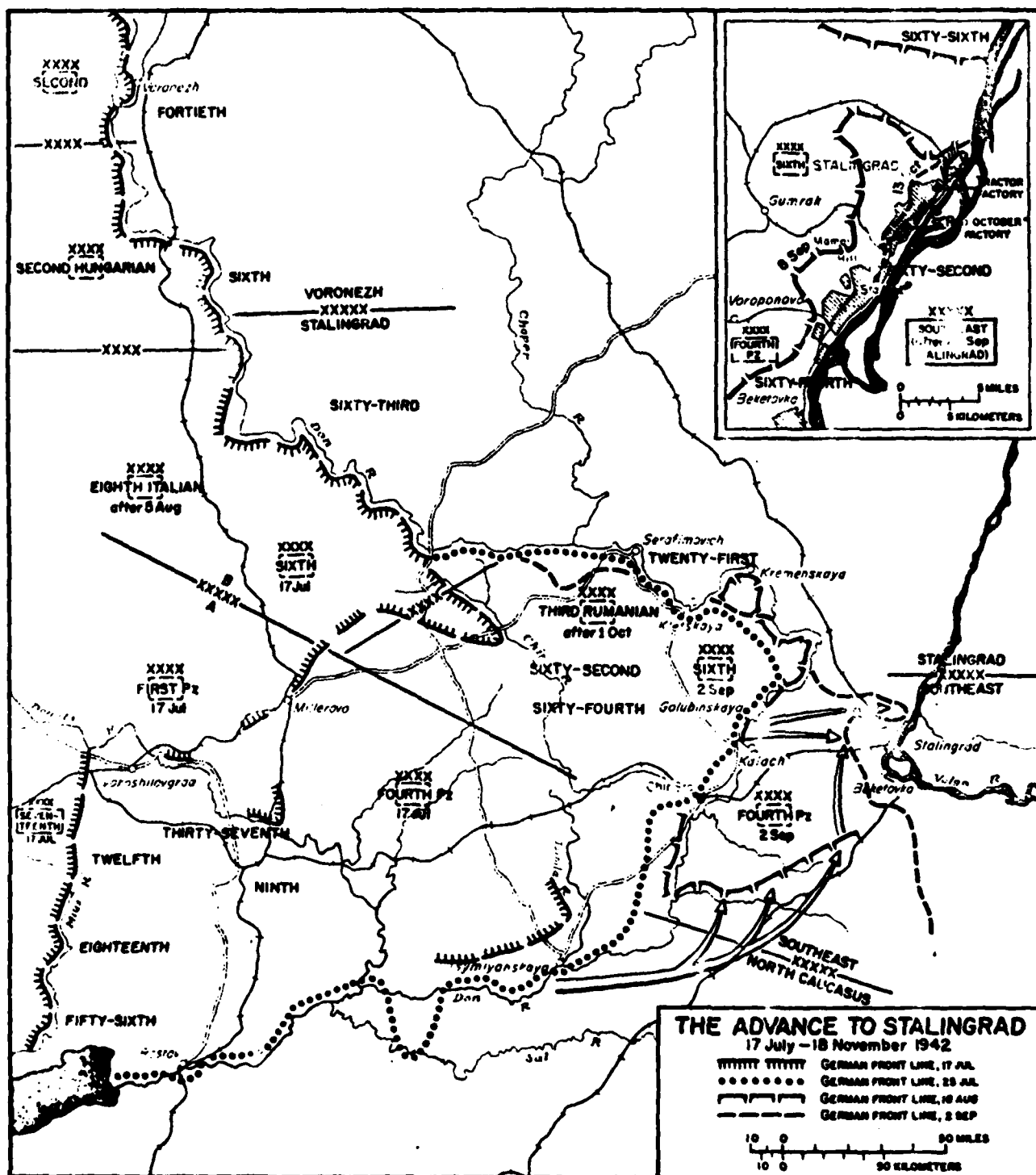
## Conclusion

Success at the tactical-level must be measured within the operational context as it was by Balck and von Mellenthin in 1942. Holding the Chir was absolutely vital. Similarly, NATO's forward defense posture appears to be predicated in part on the retention of terrain, much like the predicament facing the 48th Panzer Corps in December, 1942; the political conditions in Central Europe tending to replicate the lack of operational depth existing on the Chir. The sweeping tank battles and operational maneuver room enjoyed by Balck and von Mellenthin in later battles on the Eastern Front, such as Kharkov and Kursk, in which they did not have to worry about the "bottom of the bag," are not consistent with the political realities of today. Consequently, the Chir holds for us valuable historical lessons, one of them being on timing counterattacks.

The experience of the 48th Panzer Corps teaches us that timing tactical-level counterattacks depends not on some mythical "right" time, but rather on more fundamental precepts embodied in the principles of war. Deciding when to counterattack at the tactical-level becomes a problem not of what or how much information a commander needs to make the decision, but one of making the decision within the context of the battle itself, consistent with the generally accepted principles of surprise and

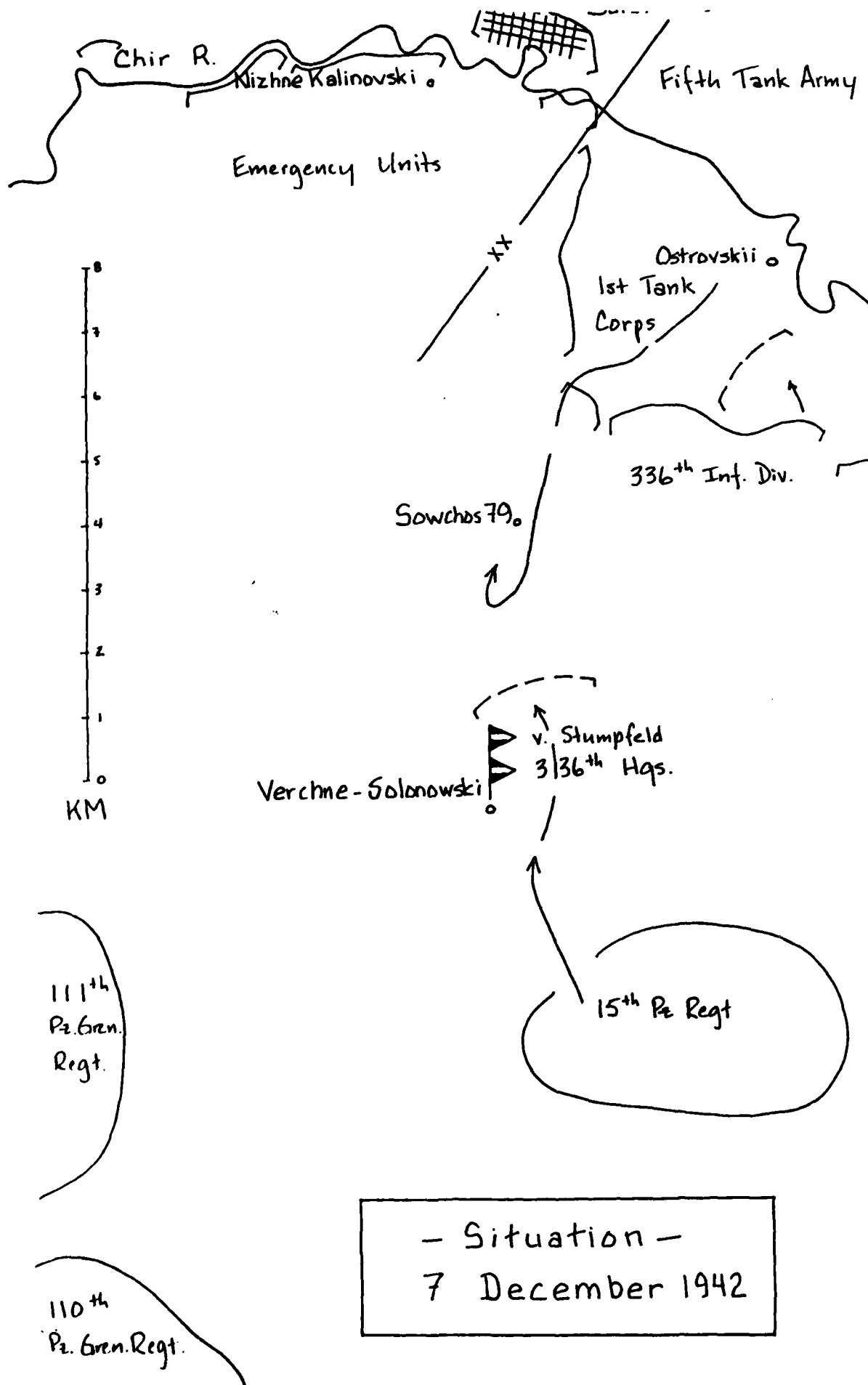


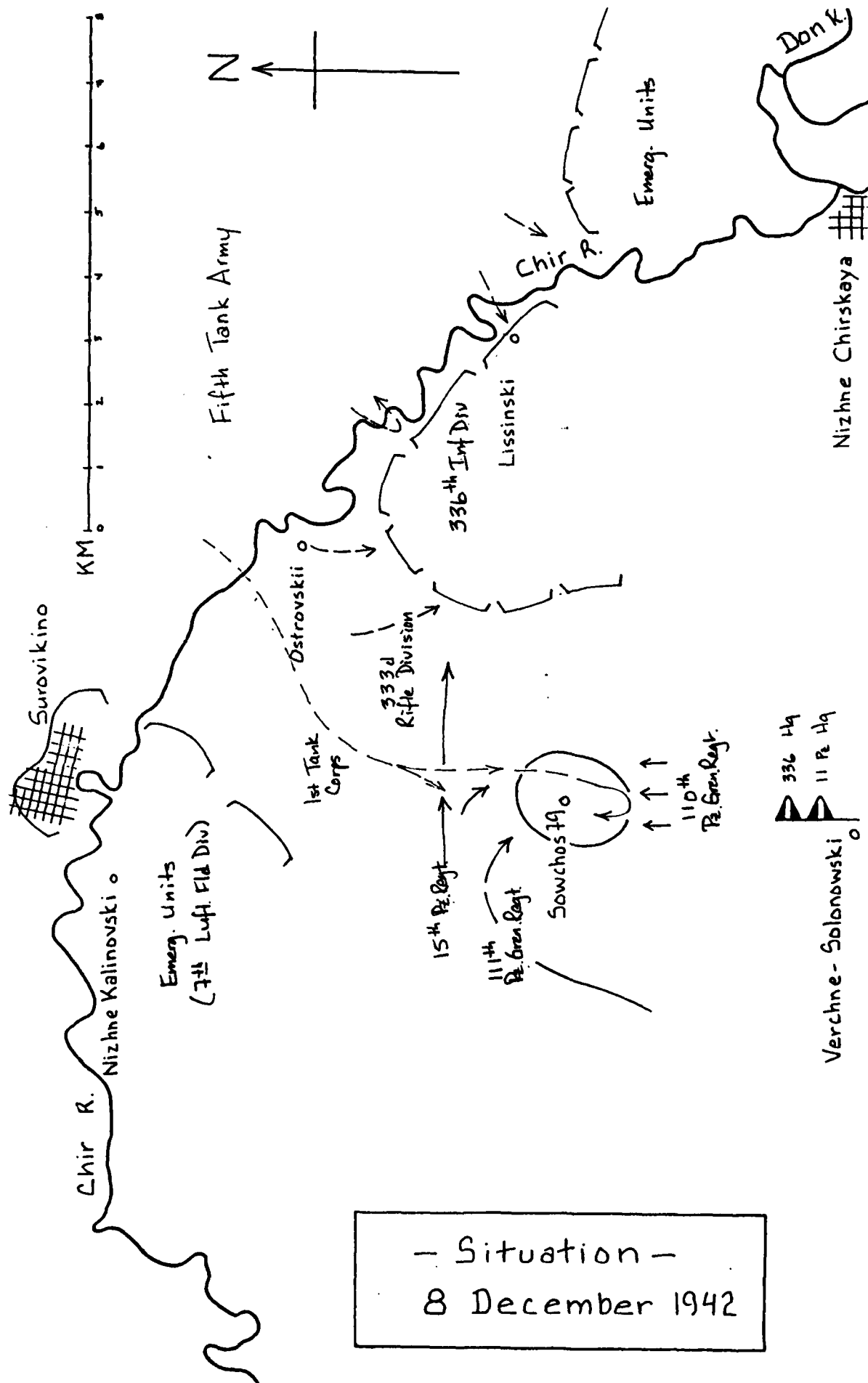
mass. The commander should not wait until he has a clear intelligence picture of the battlefield, but should strike the enemy as hard and as quickly as he can once he knows that a penetration has occurred. The experience of the 48th Panzer Corps suggests that counterattacks can be on time or worse, late, but rarely will they be early. Therefore, I do not think that we can rely on the "window of opportunity" being open wide enough to overcome the proverbial fog of war: chance, uncertainty, and confusion. As a result, we might want to rethink the implications in our doctrine of sophistication in timing. Conditions on the battlefield, as well as the enemy, will be working against our efforts to seize the initiative and our doctrine should account for that. Doctrine which focuses our attention on principles of war, such as surprise and mass, instead of on sophisticated techniques might be the key to success. Our doctrine would then serve to guide aspiring tacticians to be more effective at imposing violence at a speed which will overwhelm the enemy's ability to cope. As General Balck stated so well, "When facing the Russian you can't sit down and calculate that he has so and so many divisions or weapons or what not. That's all baloney. You have to attack him instantly and throw him out of his position. He is no match for that."<sup>48</sup>



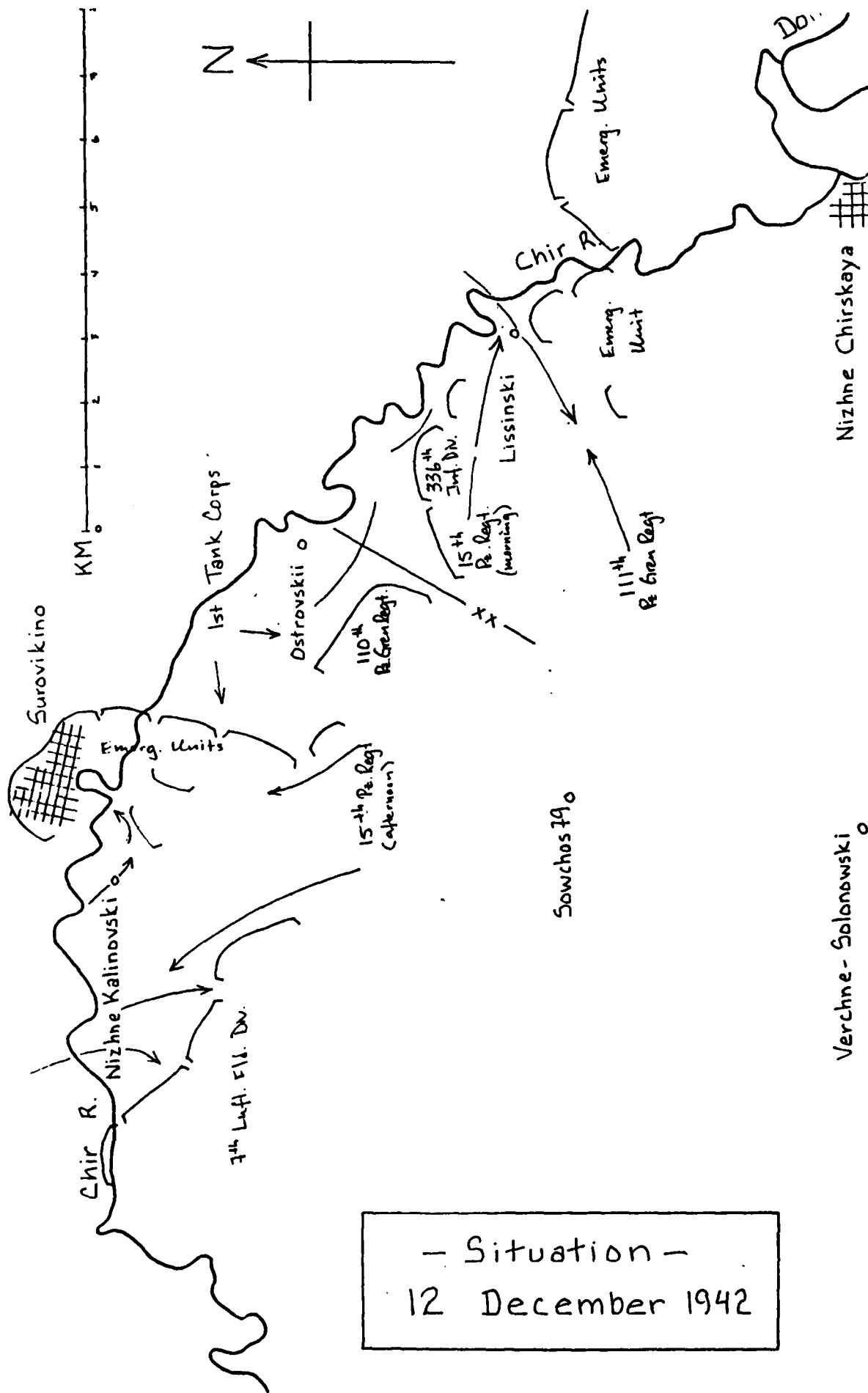
Map I <sup>49</sup>



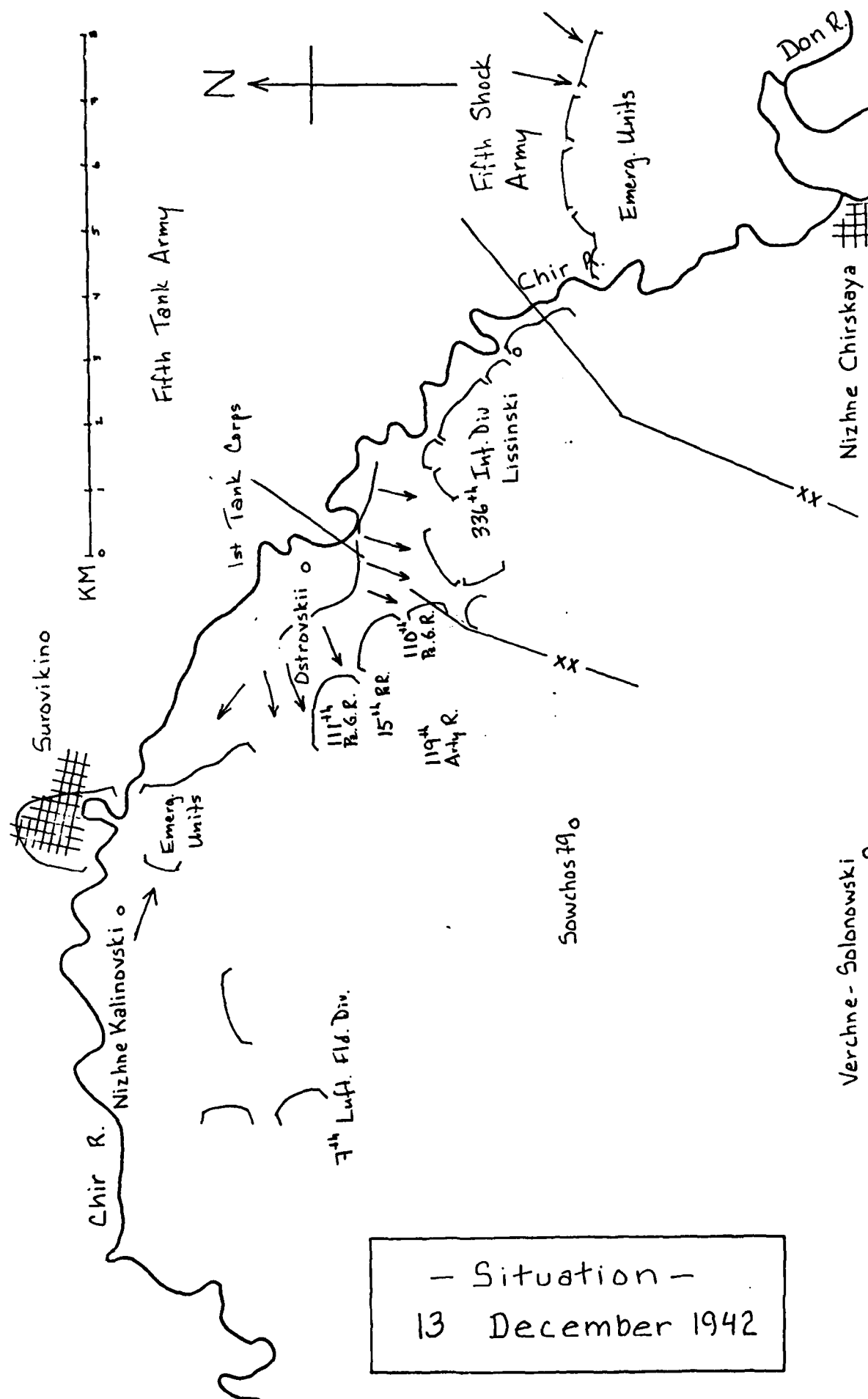




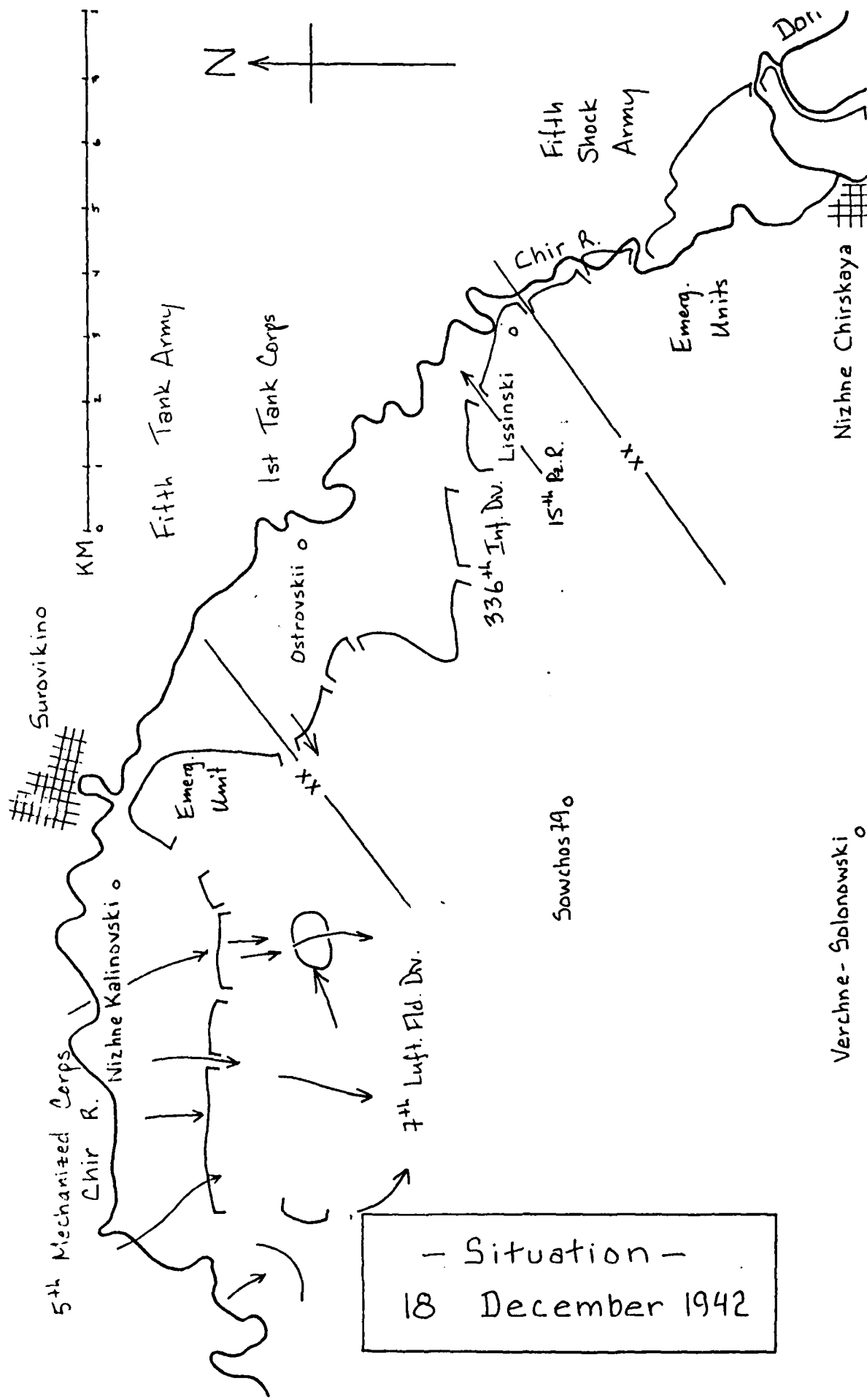
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- Situation -  
12 December 1942



- Situation -  
13 December 1942





## Order of Battle

German -- 48th Panzer Corps

General Knokeisdorff

11th Panzer Division

General Balck

- 15th Panzer Regiment
- 110th Panzer Grenadier Regiment
- 111th Panzer Grenadier Regiment
- 119th Panzer Artillery Regiment
- 61st Motorcycle Battalion
- 231st Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion
- 231st Anti-Tank Battalion
- 231st Panzer Engineer Regiment
- 341st Panzer Signal Battalion

336th Infantry Division

General Lucht

- 685th Infantry Regiment
- 686th Infantry Regiment
- 687th Infantry Regiment
- 336th Artillery Regiment
- 336th Anti-Tank Battalion
- 336th Engineer Battalion
- 336th Signal Company

7th Luftwaffe Field Division

- 13th Field Infantry Regiment
- 14th Field Infantry Regiment
- 7th Field Artillery Regiment
- 7th Field Fusilier Regiment
- 7th Field Anti-Tank Battalion
- 7th Field Engineer Battalion
- 7th Field Signal Battalion
- 7th Field Anti-Aircraft Battalion

384th Infantry Division (Headquarters Only)

Controlled emergency units on the Don River after its combat formations were caught in the Stalingrad pocket.

403d Security Division

Soviets -- Fifth Tank Army

Ulben. Komanenko

40th Guards Rifle Division  
47th Guards Rifle Division  
119th Rifle Division  
121st Rifle Division  
133d Rifle Division  
146th Rifle Division

5. Artillery Regiments  
6. Tank Destroyer Regiments  
7. Anti-aircraft Artillery Regiments  
8. Mortar Regiments  
9. Multiple Rocket Launcher Regiments

1st Tank Corps

89th Tank Brigade  
117th Tank Brigade  
159th Tank Brigade  
44th Motorized Rifle Brigade

8th Cavalry Corps

21st Cavalry Division  
35th Cavalry Division  
112th Cavalry Division

Strength: about 90,000 men

182 tanks  
1213 guns/mortars

5th Mechanized Corps (as of 6 December) (183 tanks)

45th Mechanized Brigade  
49th Mechanized Brigade  
50th Mechanized Brigade  
108th Tank Regiment  
188th Tank Regiment

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29. Battelle, Translation of Taped Conversation with General Hermann Balck, 13 April 1979, Contract No. DAAK40-78-C-0004 (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Columbus Laboratories Tactical Technology Center, 1979), p. 16. Hereafter cited as Battelle, Balck-April 1979.

30. BDM, p. 48.

31. The description of the battles and engagements which follow are from von Mellenthin's Panzer Battles, pp. 175-184; Battelles, von Mellenthin; Shaposhnikov; and extrapolations from the Lagenkarten XXXVIII Pz. Korps, maps for 6.12.42. to 18.12.42.

32. von Manstein, p. 331.

33. Ibid. p. 337.

34. Ibid. p. 341.

35. BDM, p. 19.

36. Battelle, Balck-April 1979, p. 16.

37. Battelle, von Mellenthin-1979, p. 41.

38. Battelle, translation of taped conversation with Lieutenant General Heinz Giedke, 12 April 1979. Contract No. DAAK40-78-C-0004 (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Columbus Laboratories Tactical Technology Center, 1979), pp. 27-28.

39. BDM, pp. 18-19.

40. Battelle, von Mellenthin-1979, p. 28.

41. FM 100-5, p. 9-10.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid., p. 2-6.

44. Ibid., p. 8-12.

45. Battelle, von Mellenthin-1979, p. 32.

46. BDM, pp. 13-14.

47. Battelle, von Mellenthin-1979, p. 40.

48. Battelle, Balck-April 1979, p. 15.

49. Ziemke, p. 38.

50. Ibid. p. 51.

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